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Identifying Exemplary School Counseling Practices in

Nationally Recognized High Schools

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### Abstract

The National Center for School Counseling Outcome Research (CSCOR) at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst studied exemplary practices of 18 high schools that received recognition for college preparation and placement in 2004 and 2005. Through interviews with key personnel at each of the high schools, the researchers generated a set of ten domains that characterize the work of the school counselor that seem to be related to improved student enrollment in post-secondary institutions.

## Identifying Exemplary School Counseling Practices in Nationally Recognized High Schools

Public education today is focused on student outcomes, accountability, evidence-based practice, and high-stakes testing (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Elmore, 2003; McDonnell, 2004). To meet these demands and the needs of students and colleagues, the role and responsibilities of school counselors are shifting. The movement began in 1998 with the groundbreaking work of Education Trust Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Martin, 2002). Subsequently, the work to reconceptualize and reinvigorate the role of school counselors with a focus on student achievement for all students has been formalized and elaborated in the American School Counselor Association's National Model for School Counseling Programs (American School Counselor Association, 2003). It is an acknowledged priority in the field to identify which school counseling practices and interventions are most likely to significantly impact student achievement (Dimmitt, Carey, McGannon, & Henningson, 2005), and increasingly school counselors are implementing programs that respond to the demands for evidence of how their work impacts key student achievement outcomes. The key to understanding how counselors can maximally impact student achievement may lie in the empirical identification of effective practices, but considerably more information is needed in order to prioritize and promote effective practices.

School counseling programs can be crucial components of school reform efforts because they are uniquely situated to impact educational outcomes such as rigorous course-taking, career plans, graduation, and college applications and enrollment (Bemak, 2000; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Green & Keys, 2001). School counselors are

particularly vital in efforts to deal with achievement gaps, since they are often called upon to identify, develop, and/or administer interventions for students who are struggling academically (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Lee & Goodnough, 2007; Martin, 2002).

Linking school counseling interventions to achievement outcomes is complicated, because any educational outcome is a result of complex, interconnected factors. School structures, school size, teaching practices, curricula, policies, school climate, programs, and resources, as well as students, families, teachers, school support staff, and administrators, and the relationships among those groups, all impact student achievement outcomes (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003; Dimmitt, 2003; Fields & Hines, 2000; Hilty, 1998; Marchant, Paulson, & Rothlisberg, 2001). Existing research about the impact of school counseling interventions on student achievement, as measured by state test scores (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Sink & Stroh, 2003), demonstrates that both specific school counseling interventions and comprehensive programs can impact student achievement. Sink and Stroh (2003) found that students who matriculated for at least three years in elementary schools with thoroughly implemented comprehensive school counseling programs showed academic benefits.

On a broader scope, educational researchers are focusing on identifying which general characteristics of schools and educational practices support widespread student achievement (Elias, Arnold, & Hyssey, 2003; National Academy of Sciences, 1999). Distributed leadership practices and the creation of communities of learning can enhance internal capacity, increase connectivity within schools, and improve pedagogy (Elmore, 2000; Halverson, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; O'Day, 2004). Schools that are

student-centered promote student engagement and empowerment, which fuels achievement (Borman et al., 2003; Elias et al., 2003). Educational programs based on practices that are evidence-based and well researched are more likely to be successful (Borman et al., 2003).

### Purpose of the Study

This study sought to provide a voice to counselors and school personnel in high schools that have been identified as successful within specific academic achievement domains. While a number of studies have been conducted relative to school counseling practices and their impact on student achievement, pragmatic examples of best practices in school counseling in contextualized settings that foster improvements in student achievement are largely absent. The previous conceptual and empirical literature assisted the research team to develop a meaningful and thoughtful methodological design.

The purpose of this study was to identify potential distinguishing characteristics of the work of high school counselors in districts that have demonstrated exemplary performance addressing the achievement gap in college placement. The following research questions guided this study: What are the innovative practices that propel the advancement of student transition to post-secondary settings? And, which practices of school counselors are related to high rates of college placement? This study is an initial qualitative investigation of exemplary practice designed to generate hypotheses about the relationship between the work of school counselors in promoting college transitions for low-income students.

## Method

### *Procedure and Participants*

Each year three outstanding high schools are recognized for improving rates of attendance to post-secondary education. The award is sponsored by a nationally recognized not-for-profit educational organization. The three winning schools receive \$25,000 and honorable mention schools receive \$1,000 each. To qualify for the award, high schools must document that at least 40% of the student body qualifies for free or reduced lunches. Additionally, schools must demonstrate significant and consistent growth for all students in three areas: enrollment in rigorous curricula (e.g., Advanced Placement courses), participation in college preparatory coursework, and the percentage of students accepted to two- or four-year institutions of higher education. The organizations award criteria states, “We seek secondary schools that are truly a springboard to college, despite the social, cultural, and economic barriers that stand in the way of their students.” In the first year of the award, three schools won the award and five schools received honorable mention. In 2005, three schools won the award and seven schools received honorable mention.

In order to answer the research questions, an interview protocol was developed. The researchers focused on the 18 award winning or honorable mention schools, which represented seven states (California, Florida, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, and Texas) and the District of Columbia (see Table 1 below). In general, the schools that participated in this study were large, traditional, grade 9 through 12 institutions that served an average of over 2000 students (only one high school had a 7-

Table 1

*Description of 18 High Schools*

Site	Award or Honorable Mention	School Population	Free/ Reduced Lunch	College Acceptance Rates	AP Courses Offered	Racial Majority
CAHS 1	2004 AW	3608	40%	61%	1999 / 6 2004 / 13	65% Hispanic
FLHS	2004 AW	3139	76%	75%	1999 / 10 2003 / 16	91% Hispanic
NJHS	2005 HM	536	100%	100%	1999 / 5 2004 / 10	92% African American
NMHS	2005 AW	2380	100%	57%	1999 / 3 2004 / 7	90% Hispanic
TXHS 1	2004 AW	1993	82%	82%	1999 / 12 2003 / 16	96% Hispanic
TXHS 2	2005 AW	2502	55%	75%	1999 / 14 2003 / 22	87% Hispanic
TXHS 3	2004 HM	1569	70%	46%	1999 / 10 2003 / 15	81% Hispanic
CAHS 2	2005 HM	4115	75%	56%	1999 / 13 2003 / 21	60% Hispanic
NYHS 1	2005 HM	745	100%	85%	1999 / 0 2003 / 2	60% Hispanic
NCHS	2004 HM	1,286	53%	87%	1999 / 11 2003 / 12	98% African American
NYHS 2	2005 HM	382	40%	97.8%	1999 / 4 2003 / 6	98% White
DCHS	2005 HM	402	40%	100%	2000 / 8 2004 / 11	91% African American
TXHS 4	2005 HM	837	78%	69%	1999 / 20 2003 / 32	58% African American
NYHS 3	2005 HM	3666	65-78%	94%	1999 / 7 2003 / 11	51% Hispanic
TXHS 5	2004 HM	2,663	74%	91%	1999 / 11 2003 / 19	98% Hispanic
CAHS 3	2004 HM	3,186	71.50%	94.51%	1999 / 18 2003 / 19	44% Hispanic
TXHS 6	2004 HM	726	100%	72%	1999 / 5 2003 / 9	99% Hispanic
NYHS 4	2005 HM	2,372	57%	85%	2000 / 9 2004 / 10	43% White



12 configuration). The average participating school was comprised of 81% traditionally under-represented students. The students attending these schools can be characterized as lower socio-economic status, with 74% eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. On average, these schools offered 13 Advanced Placement classes. Students at these schools had 83% likelihood of being accepted at a college or university. Between February and April of 2006, the research team conducted phone interviews with the principal and the head of the school counseling department at each site.

### *Instrument*

The research team constructed a phone questionnaire to obtain data regarding exemplary school counseling practices and the characteristics of the building leadership and school counseling program. The questionnaire was comprised of three sections: demographic data, closed items, and open responses. The demographic section asked participants to describe their position and tenure in the school and the structure of the school counseling department, including number of staff. Further demographic questions focused on the school's involvement in a school counseling model and engagement in equity-focused, school-wide reform efforts. Participants responded to 24 closed items on a 5-point rating scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, and Not Sure). Additionally, participants were asked to provide an example or response to each closed item. The 24 items were housed under the following categories:

- Belief System and Role (e.g., counselor's dispositions regarding high expectations for all students)
- Program (e.g., counselor-driven innovations)

- Leadership (e.g., counselor's role in school decision-making process)
- Student Advocacy (e.g., counselor's role in providing students with emotional and academic support)
- Advocacy in College Counseling (e.g., counselor's work with parents, post-secondary institutions, and community)
- The Use of Data (e.g., counselor's use of data to drive interventions)

Finally, the open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on and provide examples of the features, structure, climate, and programs in the school that contributed to being identified as an award winning school.

### *Data Analysis*

The phone questionnaires allowed the researchers to gather descriptive and perceptual data from the 18 schools. The interview data was transcribed for analysis, the transcripts were coded, and emergent categories were developed. The investigators began by individually reviewing the transcripts, then met as a group to uncover themes and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, the research team reviewed documents provided by each district and the award granting institution. Using all the data sources, the research team constructed a set of ten domains that best characterized practices from the 18 high schools.

### **Results**

Based on our analysis of the interview items, ten themes were identified that reflect major distinguishing characteristics of school counseling practice in these schools. Consistent with the hypothesis-generating purpose of this study, we used liberal criteria to identify the presence of a theme: evidence of presence in at least three

schools. At present, these themes are best considered as hypothetical characteristics associated with school counseling programs that are very effective in college preparation, application, and placement with low-income students.

*1. School Counselors show effective program management practices.*

None of the school counseling programs in the 18 schools was intentionally organized around a formal model (such as ASCA National Model, Education Trust, or Comprehensive Developmental Guidance), although all programs showed practices that are consistent with one or more of these models. School counselor staffing patterns and student ratios varied widely across schools. Several schools showed traditional staffing patterns with ratios of approximately 300 students per counselor. In contrast, one school had a single certified school counselor for a building with over 3,600 students. The school counselor was primarily responsible for college counseling, while five uncertified guidance technicians handled scheduling.

Most programs showed evidence of effective management practices that supported outreach, collaboration, and efficient service delivery. While roles and staffing patterns differed across schools, in all schools the roles of individuals involved in the school counseling program were clearly defined, plainly articulated and understood by school administration and staff. In many schools, there was ample support staff available to free counselors from routine clerical responsibilities. In a few programs, support staff members were trained to handle some direct service responsibilities (e.g., helping parents complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)). School counselors in a few programs also had flextime arrangements with administration to facilitate evening and weekend outreach work with parents. We

hypothesize that in these schools, effective management practices resulted in efficient used of resources and maximal impact of interventions.

*2. School Counselors maintain external partnerships that add resources and social capital.*

All of the school counseling programs had external partnerships with higher education and/or business that enhanced program functioning and effectiveness. In many programs, school counselors were instrumental in setting up and/or maintaining these partnerships. In some schools, partnerships with high-tech businesses provided internships and mentorship opportunities for students. In other schools, business partnerships provided scholarship and/or financial support for college applications and AP exams. Many schools participated in programmatic outreach initiatives (e.g., Gear Up). One particularly innovative school had a full-time college transition counselor, funded by a local state university, on site at the high school. This person worked under the supervision of the college counselor and implemented individual and group college counseling, classroom-based developmental guidance lessons, and parent outreach programs. We hypothesize that in these schools effective partnerships would be in place to enhance the resources of the school counseling program and establish relationships among students, parents, members of the business community and members of the higher education community.

*3. School Counselors are leaders in the school.*

In the majority of the schools, we saw evidence that school counselors were powerful members of the school community and participated in the leadership of the school. School counselors were frequently appointed members of the principal's school

leadership team and/or elected members of school governance bodies. In one school, the college counselor was appointed to the leadership team at the request of the academic department heads because of her recognized expertise in college standards and students' needs. In another school, two members of the school counseling department were actively involved in the design of a new teacher-mentor program for the school. We hypothesize that more effective college transition occurs when school counselors are recognized within the school for their special knowledge and expertise and exercise their role as school leaders to promote effective program and practices.

*4. School Counselors show effective college-focused interventions with low-income students.*

We saw clear evidence that school counselors in these schools were particularly effective in designing and implementing college-focused interventions that addressed the particular issues of low-income, first-generation college students. Most programs had aggressive outreach initiatives that began as early as eighth grade and which included information on the financial benefits of college, the mechanics of the application process, and detailed information about scholarships and college affordability. One school required that all students complete college applications as a graduation requirement and began orienting students to the elements of an application in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Many programs incorporated elements of college counseling into classrooms. In some schools, counselors delivered classroom guidance lessons on careers in academic courses. In other schools, all senior students filled out FAFSA and state scholarship applications as part of a required Civics and Government Course. In yet another school, students developed college essays in an English course. Most

schools organized trips to local colleges. One west coast school funded a trip for selected students to prestigious east coast colleges. One school sponsors a yearly trip for all seniors to a local community college where students complete the application and placement examination. We hypothesize that part of the reason these schools were particularly effective in promoting college placement is because school counselors developed interventions that provide information and support that are not usually available to low-income students whose parents may lack experience with college.

*5. School counselors help establish an achievement-oriented school climate.*

We saw clear evidence in most schools that school counselors were active participants and leaders in establishing a climate that conveys high expectations for all students, encourages students to accept challenges, and supports students in meeting those expectations. One school counselor indicated that while she knows that not all students will attend college, she wanted the students' choices to be based on their interests and aspirations, not on inaccurate beliefs about their ability to do college work. In many schools there was evidence that counselors encouraged the vast majority of students to take challenging courses (e.g., college prep, honors, and Advanced Placement), monitored student progress, and connected students to academic supports when needed. In most schools, school counselors were actively engaged in outreach activities to help parents understand the importance of rigorous coursework. In several schools, school counselors consulted with teachers on issues such as increasing college prep course rigor, creating consistency with college expectations, and working with more diverse groups of students in Advanced Placement courses. In some schools, counselors coordinated class visits from alumni/ae who had been or were being

successful in college. In one school, a counselor established a “Wall of Stars” that publicly recognized every student who received a college acceptance. In the same school, the counselor made sure that students who received acceptances were acknowledged in the principal’s Friday public address announcements and by a special ribbon at graduation. We hypothesize that in these schools counselors promote college applications through active leadership in creating a climate where all students are considered capable and where achievement is expected and acknowledged.

*6. School counselors implement effective parent academic and financial outreach programs.*

All schools acknowledged the critical role that parents play in students’ college decisions. Most schools showed very aggressive and successful parent outreach initiatives. In many of these schools educational personnel provided information for parents and also supplied extensive assistance in the college application process for students.

In schools that were particularly effective in promoting involvement of low-income, working-class parents, several characteristics of effective programming were noted. First, school counselors conveyed an appreciation for the barriers to involvement that existed for low-income and working-class parents. Second, school counselors designed parent outreach in consideration of these barriers. For example, in one school the college center is open and staffed until 10 p.m. to assist parents with the financial aid process. In another school, parent nights are scheduled to coincide with the first student progress reports. Parents can stop by after work, get something to eat at school and meet with the teachers and counselors. Third, school counselors employed an

experimental attitude. If turnout at an event was unsatisfactory, counselors tried new approaches rather than repeating ineffective outreach practices. Fourth, college outreach began prior to or early in high school. Fifth, parent outreach occurred in multiple formats including parent conferences and parent nights that “piggy backed” on special parent meetings (e.g., migrant parent groups). Sixth, parent outreach programs were delivered in multiple languages. Seventh, parent outreach provided a comprehensive range of content that is especially needed by low-income and working-class parents (e.g., benefits of attending college, financing college, application mechanics, and financial aid application mechanics) so that they can support their children’s college aspirations and transition. Eighth, school counselors paid special attention to the financial aspect of college so that low-income parents did not inappropriately foreclose on the college option because of perceived financial barriers and so that parents received the information and support that is necessary to make college affordable.

In two schools, teacher-mentor programs were established so that teachers could encourage college attendance and help students manage the application and financial aid process. In these schools, counselors functioned as expert consultants to mentor teachers. We hypothesize that in schools that are effective in promoting college aspirations of low-income students, school counselors have found effective ways to involve parents and also collaborate with school staff members who are engaged in college mentoring activities.



*7. School counselors think systemically and use multi-level interventions.*

In several schools, we found evidence that school counselors employ systemic thinking to understand problems and use systemic interventions to create solutions. For example, one counselor described the interventions needed to promote a school goal of having more students taking Advanced Placement courses. She noted that it was necessary to help students understand the importance of taking rigorous coursework; to help parents understand that it was often better for students to take rigorous courses (even if grades suffered); to help teachers understand how to teach to a broader range of students, and to help administrators understand that holding teachers accountable for average AP exam scores (rather than increases in number of students taking AP examinations) was counterproductive. We hypothesize that school counselors' ability to understand complex problems in systemic terms and to intervene effectively at multiple levels contribute to a school's effectiveness in addressing difficult problems such as improving the college placement of low-income students.

*8. School counselors use school data effectively.*

Effective use of data by school counselors was noted in only a few schools. The most frequent use of data was the documentation of levels of participation in programs (e.g., parent nights) and college placement outcomes (e.g., college acceptances and scholarship awards) in order to present accountability data to administrators. One counselor developed annual Power Point presentations on college acceptances and scholarships that were presented to district leadership.

While some programs at times used data as a decision-making tool, no program made extensive use of data in program planning. Some schools used outcome data

(e.g., number of college applications) to evaluate the impact of selected interventions. For example, one school noted that when a program to finance AP examinations ended, the number of exams taken decreased by 50%. One school counseling program was in the beginning stages of adopting a formal data-based decision making model for the school counseling program (Dahir & Stone, 2003) as part of a statewide reform initiative.

We hypothesize that school counseling programs that document outcomes (especially valued outcomes such as college admission rates and college scholarships) are more likely to receive needed program support and are therefore in a better position to help students. At this point, we did not find evidence that the success of these programs was attributable to widespread effective data use in planning and evaluation for program improvement.

*9. School counselors facilitate the development and implementation of inclusive school policies.*

In several schools it was evident that school counselors were active in the development and/or implementation of school policies that promote college aspirations and attendance. In these schools, counselors capitalized on their participation in formal leadership structures (school leadership teams) and/or on their recognized expertise and credibility. In these schools, school counselors had a documented impact on important policies such as graduation requirements, attendance, course sequence, and AP and honors course admission. In schools where the school counselors were not actively engaged in formal leadership activities, school counselors were also not involved in school policy formation. In these particular schools, policies that promote

college aspirations and attendance were developed without counselor input. We hypothesize that school counselors can be important contributors to school policies that promote college aspirations and attendance; however, they will not be involved in policy formation unless they are recognized as having critical expertise and are actively engaged in school leadership.

*10. School counselors routinize mundane aspects of the job or offload nonessential activities to free up time for innovative practice.*

We found evidence that in several programs “nonprofessional” aspects of the work were handled efficiently and effectively by support staff. Guidance secretaries were available in several programs and freed counselors to do professional work by handling clerical tasks (e.g., typing support letters, managing test booklets) efficiently. In one program, guidance technicians handled routine student scheduling, enabling the guidance counselor to focus on developmental interventions, teacher consultation, and parent outreach. On three sites, on-campus health centers provided crisis intervention and ongoing mental health counseling, freeing the counselors to focus on academic and career issues. We hypothesize that at the more effective sites, school counselors are able to devote more time to professional activities that directly promote college aspirations and attendance.

### Discussion

The present study’s findings are both similar to and different from those of Fitch and Marshall (2004) who examined the importance accorded to different facets of the school counselor role and function by counselors working in schools that showed high achievement and low achievement on the reading and math sections of the

Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). Fitch and Marshall found that counselors in high achieving schools reported spending more time on:

- 1) program management, evaluation, and research;
- 2) coordination or “influencing systems more than individuals” (p. 176); and
- 3) tasks related to adhering to professional standards (e.g., aligning programs to state and national standards).

In the present study, we saw little evidence of a focus on the use of data and evaluation to guide planning and practice (although we did note that data was used to document attainment of outcomes to decision-makers) and very little focus on assuring adherence to published professional standards of practice.

Like Fitch and Marshall, we did see a focus on systemic interventions and collaborating extensively with the other adults in the school (parents, teachers and administrators) in order to impact student outcomes. The differences between the two studies may reflect the fact that the achievement outcome for this study was rigorous course taking and college placement of seniors, while in the Fitch and Marshall study the outcome was Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills reading and math scores for students in grades three, six, and nine. Additionally, this sample was drawn from schools with very high percentages of low-income students, while Fitch and Marshall's sample was drawn from a more diverse sample of schools. Given that Fitch and Marshall's sampling procedures failed to control for level of resources, it may also be that their results reflect differences in district resources rather than performance. Greater resources in wealthy districts may allow school counseling programs to focus more on professional standards and issues. Such resources may not only include

financial assistance (e.g., additional counselors for a smaller counselor to student ratio), but also more active involvement by parents in the community. Lareau (2000) posits that affluent parents are more active in their children's schooling and feel more entitled to implement their demands in schools. While firm conclusions cannot be drawn at this point, the discrepancies between these findings suggest that the desirable characteristics of effective school counseling programs may not be absolute entities and are likely to be related to both the student population and the outcome being measured.

### Limitations

The ten characteristics of effective school counseling practice noted above are best considered at present as hypotheses about the necessary elements that comprise a high school program that will positively impact college attendance. Although this study provides valuable information about some of the practices that influence college placement, there are limitations to this work. First, further research is needed to determine the salience and relative importance of each of these characteristics. A more in-depth case study of school counseling practices in schools that are particularly effective in promoting college for low-income students is needed to better understand and document how these characteristics are manifested within a school to affect college placement outcomes. It is also important in follow-up research to contrast these characteristics in high-performing schools, average schools and low-performing schools in order to confirm the relationship between the presence (or level) of these characteristics and the desired program outcome. Second, while the outcome variable of college placement was used to identify exemplary schools, other important variables warrant additional research. For example, if schools were selected on the basis of high

school graduation rate or high state test scores, other characteristics may have emerged as important. Finally, more specific studies are needed to explore the hypotheses generated by this study. Without additional research, generalizing these results should be done with caution.

### Implications

The findings reported in this study have implications for educational practice and future research efforts. The hypotheses presented from the study of 18 high performing high schools provides a glimpse into the declarative (*what*) practices and structures and the procedural (*how*) questions of operationalized practices that are reported by the schools as improving college placement. While this study only begins to illuminate potential examples of effective efforts to ameliorate the college placement achievement gap, several themes do emerge that may help practitioners to better their own college placement rates:

- 1) The adults in the schools participating in this study successfully defined and agreed upon their own outcome measures for students,
- 2) These schools consistently pursued the agreed upon outcomes and measured the success of their own efforts,
- 3) School staff looked beyond their defined job descriptions and distributed responsibility for attaining the desired student outcomes,
- 4) Schools in this study consistently utilized and maximized existing community capital and culture, and
- 5) All participating schools increased Advanced Placement offerings and placement by an average of 66%.

The powerful practitioner implications of this work will only become relevant when further research is conducted and the role of counselors in establishing and supporting these characteristics is better elaborated. This research team is currently developing case studies from visits to five of the 18 schools reported on in this study in the hope to elucidate and test the tentative hypotheses presented here.

### Conclusion

As Richard Rothstein (2004) wrote describing the achievement gap, “raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform” (p. 11). Schools participating in this study have taken a large first step to increase both the hopes and life options of lower SES students. Professional school counselors in these buildings have played a significant role in creating reform efforts and garnering the organizational cohesion necessary to successfully close the college placement achievement gap. Professional school counselors, due to the nature of their position, are well positioned to instigate and drive these crucial educational reforms. This article broadly highlights the ways in which school counselors have embraced such reform efforts, and in some cases radically redefined their role within their schools and attained exceptional student outcomes. It continues to be our hope that such research can drive effective and meaningful practice.

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